

## Adoption Has No Age Limits: Adult Adoptions



**T**hink back to when you were 18, 21, 40. Were your parents there for you? Were you able to handle everything you needed when you moved out? Or did you still come home to do laundry, check out the refrigerator and bug your younger siblings? Were your parents at your wedding? Did you make vacation plans around your parents' holiday celebrations? Did your need for a family ever go away?

In Wisconsin, adoptions can occur at any age. There are many reasons why adoptions are finalized for adults, but one of the primary reasons is that being adopted creates a life-long connection for the adult adoptee.

Dustin Bronsdon, who was adopted as an adult, says "Family has always been important to me, and just because I turned 18, didn't mean that I don't still have a big need to belong."

He laughs and says, "My fiancée wasn't too thrilled to see that I had found the Bronsdon family crest and had it tattooed on my shoulder. But that's how much being part of a *family* means to me."



He goes on to say that "Being adopted lets you feel part of something—something real. It gives you an identity that was missing before."

There are generally three main reasons for adult adoptions:

- Formalizing a child-parent relationship so the family truly feels like they belong together.
- Inheritance rights—especially in cases of trust funds and beneficiaries where "relatives" or "children" are only mentioned generally—not by a specific name.
- Perpetual care for someone who has cognitive delays or other disabilities.

According to *Adopting.org*, the most common

reason for adult adoptions involves inheritance rights. However, most of the phone calls we receive at ARW regarding adult adoption usually pertain to formalizing the adult-child relationship—particularly in cases of unmarried partner adoptions, step parent adoptions and

adoptions of adults who had were in the child welfare system.

### Formalizing the Adult-Child Relationship

One common scenario for adult adoptions is in

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cases of unmarried couples. For example, a mother has two children whose biological father isn't part of their lives. Her boyfriend has raised the kids since they were toddlers, and they have always considered him their father.

But in Wisconsin, it's not legal for the partner of an unmarried couple to adopt, so he was never able to adopt them when they were children. Now that they're adults, they've decided to make the family a legal family.

Similarly, there are some step parents who would like to adopt their step children. For a variety of reasons, they haven't been able to adopt them as children, but then do so as adults.

Another call we get at ARW has to do with adopting from the foster care system. For example, a family might be planning to adopt a sibling group. However, one of the children is 17 and the adoption isn't likely to go through before she turns 18. The family will still adopt the younger siblings as children, but will wait until the oldest one is an adult.

In Dustin's case, his foster mom adopted his 16-year-old sister Heidi in July and offered to adopt him at that time, too. He wanted to wait until his college financial aid was in place before he formally joined the family so he didn't lose his "independent" status. (The laws have since changed so that if you adopt a child after the

age of 13, that child can still be considered "independent" for financial aid.)

The years from birth to adulthood are roughly only one fourth of someone's life. The remaining 75% of anyone's life is a significant time to have—or not have—a family.

### The Process

So what's involved in an adult adoption? Since the adoption is between two consenting adults, it's a relatively simple process (although when it comes to the legal system, complications *do* sometimes come up). You don't need to complete a home study, file a termination of parental rights, or involve a social worker.

In most cases, you don't even need an attorney. The actual *Petition For Adoption* legal form (see graphical excerpt) is the same as for a child

STATE OF WISCONSIN, CIRCUIT COURT, \_\_\_\_\_ COUNTY

THE MATTER OF THE ADOPTION OF \_\_\_\_\_

**Petition for Adoption**  
☐ Child  
☐ Adult

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_ Case No. \_\_\_\_\_

I, \_\_\_\_\_, do hereby swear under oath, I petition the court for an order for adoption of this person, and state that:  
 (For child adoptions, fill out sections 1-7)  
 (For adult adoptions, fill out sections 1, 8, 9 and 10)

1. I am  
☐ a relative of the child by blood.  
☐ the child's stepparent.  
☐ a proposed adoptive parent with whom the child has been placed.  
☐ an adult proposing to adopt another adult.

My address is \_\_\_\_\_  
 My telephone number is \_\_\_\_\_

2. The parental rights of the mother  
☐ were terminated and a certified copy of the Order Terminating Parental Rights is attached.  
☐ will be terminated on \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ other: \_\_\_\_\_

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adoption, but with fewer steps:

1. Fill out *the Petition for Adoption* form, which you can find at:  
<http://www.wicourts.gov/formdisplay/JC-1645.pdf?formNumber=JC-1645&formType=Form&formatId=2&language=en>
2. Request a court date from your local clerk of courts.
3. Go to court and finalize the adoption.

After the adoption, you'll get a new birth certificate with the new name (if any) of the person you're adopting. Just like adoptions of children, all adoption records are sealed.

### Need to Belong

Dustin's mom, Jen Bronsdon says, "When I adopted Heidi at 16 and Dustin at 18, I didn't think anything would change. I had known them for 6 years and we already *were* family in most ways. But I was surprised—I'm still

surprised!—at what a difference the legal distinction gave us. It gives you credibility that you didn't know was missing."

She goes on to say that, "When he had his appendix out on his 21st birthday, I didn't have to explain to the hospital that I wasn't *really* his mother. I had the legal authority to claim him as my own and that made a big difference—not so much to the hospital, but to Dustin and me."

"When he got married," says Jen, "I wasn't the foster mother of the groom, or the mother-like-figure to the groom. I was the mother of the groom, like any other mother of any other groom. I never considered that I had just as much of a need to belong to my kids as they had to belong to me."



*Jen Bronsdon is also a staff member at Adoption Resources of Wisconsin.*

## Resources

### ***Petition for Adoption form***

<http://www.wicourts.gov/formdisplay/JC-1645.pdf?formNumber=JC-1645&formType=Form&formatId=2&language=en>

**You Gotta Believe** is a non-profit program that finds permanent homes for teens and preteen children in foster care.

<http://www.yougottabelieve.org>

### ***Adult Adoption***

<http://www.adopting.org/adoptions/adopting-an-adult-how-to-adopt-an-adult-person.html>

### ***Is Adoption or Guardianship a Better Fit?***

<http://wiadopt.org/library/1046/adoptvguardian.pdf>

### ***Adult Adoption a High-Stakes Means to an Inheritance***

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/21/your-money/estate-planning/21ADOPT.html>